

Tell me, Muse... Story-telling in the *Odyssey*

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The telling of stories in the Odyssey is a way of exploring how the poem's story of Odysseus' homecoming is itself told. It also reflects the sadness and joy which stories can bring to their audiences, the way in which they can help define what the identities of teller and listener are, and how sharing stories can bring out a shared sense of humanity.

It is clear to any reader of the *Odyssey* that story-telling plays an integral part in the poem. In many ways, the *Odyssey* is *about* the telling of stories. A significant portion of the poem is devoted to extended story-telling, such as Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen's stories in books 3 and 4, and Odysseus' own stories – relating his adventures to the Phaeacians in books 9 to 12, fabricating false stories about himself whilst in disguise as a beggar on Ithaca throughout the second half of the poem, and finally recapitulating the whole sequence of his adventures to Penelope in book 23.

Story-telling is a hallmark of good society and the gracious host: even the humble swineherd Eumaeus entertains his guest with food, wine – and a gripping tale to pass the night away. The *Odyssey* also contains story-telling in the form of the songs of the bards Phemius and Demodocus, whose tales about Odysseus and other Trojan war heroes reflect the *Odyssey* itself in microcosm. In fact, it is useful to think of the stories in the *Odyssey* as a set of mirrors embedded within the poem, reflecting in miniature the poem's major themes, such as identity, the power of song, and the human condition. They also do what mirrors do best – they reflect the poem in a way that allows us, its readers, to look at the *Odyssey* itself as a story within a tradition of heroic tales.

To begin at the beginning

Right from the start of the poem, we find stories connected with identity and the process of discovering who you really are. The first four books of the poem focus on a critical stage in the development of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, who has grown up in his father's absence. A mere infant when Odysseus left for Troy twenty years ago, as he approaches adulthood Telemachus is poignantly aware that he knows his father by reputation only – something which makes him insecure about his own identity. The timing of this crisis could hardly be worse, in the face of the suitors' relentless challenge to his authority over his own house: Telemachus needs to assert his status quickly, or he will lose his family estate forever.

One of Athena's motives for encouraging Telemachus to go travelling is to provide him with the opportunity to discover more about his father from those who knew him and fought with him at Troy – the aged hero Nestor and the Spartan king Menelaus. Actually, Telemachus' crisis concerning his father mirrors our own crisis as readers of the poem, because at this stage we too, like Telemachus, have only heard indirectly about Odysseus, who is stranded far away on Calypso's island; we have not yet encountered the man who is the main character of the poem – something the poet artfully suspends until the beginning of book 5. The stories about Odysseus which Telemachus hears in books 3 and 4 are therefore just as crucial for us as they are for him: they confirm our faith in the absent hero's legendary status.

Know your audience

The poet of the *Odyssey* was interested in the *effects* which stories had on their audience. He explores, for example, how stories which involve the audience personally can evoke a strong emotional response. In the very first book, when Phemius, the bard in Odysseus' palace on Ithaca, strikes up a song about the grim home-journeys of the Greek heroes after Troy – a theme that very clearly mirrors that of the *Odyssey* itself – Penelope weeps piteously and implores him to change his tune: this story is too painfully close to reality.

Menelaus' story about Odysseus in book 4 similarly reduces Telemachus to tears. Menelaus finishes his tale by reflecting on the uncertainty of Odysseus' fate, and the sadness of his family on Ithaca, who must now believe him to be dead:

*'...The aged Laertes
and temperate Penelope must surely be grieving for
him,
with Telemachus whom he left behind in his house, a
young child.'*

At these words, Telemachus weeps:

*'...and the tears fell from his eyes to the ground when he
heard his father's
name, holding with both hands the robe that was stained
with purple
up before his eyes...'*

Menelaus does not yet know the identity of the young man to whom he is talking (as it is impolite to question a guest about such things, until he has been properly entertained), but Telemachus' emotional reaction to the story leads him to the conclusion that he is none other than that young child now become a man, Telemachus himself.

This scene is echoed later in the poem, in book 8, when Odysseus, similarly an unknown guest at the banquet of the Phaeacians, weeps furtively as he listens to the bard Demodocus sing about his exploits at Troy, unaware that the hero himself is in the audience. The Phaeacian king, Alcinous, however, observes his guest's reaction, and understands its meaning:

*'These things the famous singer sang for them, but
Odysseus,
taking in his ponderous hands the great mantle dyed in
sea-purple, drew it over his head and veiled his fine
features,
shamed for tears running down his face before the
Phaeacians...
There, shedding tears, he went unnoticed by all the
others,
but Alcinous alone understood what he did and
noticed...'*

The story of us – story-telling and identity

Story-telling is therefore intimately connected with the theme of identity in the poem. Telemachus' and Odysseus' reactions to stories about themselves are the key to revealing their true identities to their guests. Stories about Odysseus establish his heroic

identity in the Greek world and beyond. Odysseus' stories of his own adventures in books 9–12 enhance his heroic status in the eyes of his audience, the Phaeacians, who lavish upon him gifts which express this heroic status in material terms.

Even within Odysseus' stories, identity is an important theme: the tale of the Cyclops in book 9 relates Odysseus' triumph over the monster by assuming a false identity – the trick name 'No-man' – and also the disastrous consequences of revealing his true identity to the enemy, thereby enabling Polyphemus to curse him. In the so-called 'Cretan tales', Odysseus toys with his identity by assuming false identities and fabricating stories about himself in the third person.

A good yarn – the pleasure of stories

We have seen several examples of stories' power to evoke feelings of sadness in their audience. The *Odyssey* also explores the more pleasant effects of story-telling – how stories have the power to enthrall their audience. Note, for example, Telemachus' comments on Menelaus' tales:

*“Son of Atreus, do not keep me with you here for a long time,
since I could well be satisfied to sit here beside you
for a year's time, without any longing for home or
parents,
such strange pleasure do I take listening to your stories
and sayings...”*

Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens in book 12 expresses the more sinister side of story-telling's mesmerizing appeal: the Sirens' song causes sailors to forget their journey, and to founder on the shore of their mysterious isle. Their song, therefore, threatens the progress of the plot of Odysseus' own story – the *Odyssey* itself – for if he stops to listen to their song, he will never return home.

Tell me about yourself – story-telling and humanity

Story-telling in the *Odyssey* is also a means by which strangers can connect with each other's experience of life and the human condition. When Odysseus, in disguise as a beggar, is offered hospitality by the humble swineherd Eumaeus, they pass the night away in exchanging stories. Eumaeus tells the stranger the story of his own life – a poignant tale of a boy who was once a prince, but was kidnapped by his treacherous nurse, taken far away, and sold into captivity. The story raises once again the theme of identity – this swineherd was once royalty – a very apt theme in this context, where the beggar listening to the tale is in fact a king in disguise.

Odysseus, however, is moved by the plight of the child, who was a helpless victim of powers greater than him:

*“You must have been very little then, O swineherd
Eumaeus,
when you wandered far away from your own country
and your parents.”*

The helplessness of the child strikes a chord with the mighty hero, who has similarly been buffeted by the powers of fate and the gods, far from his home and his family. Eumaeus' story allows the disguised king and his servant to reach across the boundaries that separate them to share briefly in a moment of sympathy about the human condition. Eumaeus' attitude, however, is philosophical: in time, one's sufferings can be converted into stories, which give pleasure in their telling:

*“But we two, sitting here in the shelter, eating and
drinking,
shall entertain each other remembering and retelling
our sad sorrows. For afterwards a man who has
suffered*

*much and wandered much has pleasure out of his
sorrows.”*

Ultimately, this is, I think, the best expression of the role of story-telling in Homer's great poem: by its own story, and the stories it contains, the *Odyssey* celebrates both human resilience and our power to create art even out of the miseries of the human lot. Odysseus, the man who had suffered and wandered much, must have felt this in his joyful recapitulation of his adventures to Penelope in the penultimate book of the poem, in the aftermath of it all. In the light of Eumaeus' words, with the final retelling of Odysseus' story in book 23, the poet himself invites us to think of the *Odyssey* as just such a work of art.

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